Colloquium 1

Gnostic Platonism

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In the early second century a Samaritan named Justin embarked on a religious quest.[1] Like other intellectuals of his day, he explored the available philosophical options. Before he discovered his true spiritual home, Justin found the solutions of the Platonists most appealing. Philosophy, however, was ultimately unsatisfying, and he eventually joined the Christian community, which he served as a teacher in Rome until his martyrdom around 165.[2]

Approximately two and a half centuries later, another probing soul made his tortuous way to Christian commitment. At a station on the path to his decisive encounter with Romans 12 at Cassiciacum Augustine took a step away from Manichaeism after reading the "libri platonici," translations of neo-Platonic texts, possibly by Marius Victorinus, the story of whose conversion Augustine later relates. From such literature Augustine learned what he came to understand as a proper concept of God and a metaphysics that enabled him to deal with the problem of evil in a new and more satisfying way than the Manichaeans had proposed.[3]

The stories of the encounters with Platonism by Justin Martyr and Augustine are emblematic of a phenomenon some aspects

1. Justin, *Dial.* 2

2. See Andresen (1952/53), pp. 157–95; Grant 1956, pp. 246–48; Barnard 1967, van Winden, 1971, Osborne 1973, and Joly 1973.

3. Augustine, *Confessions* 7.9. On Marius Victorinus, *Conf.* 8.2

of which I wish to explore with you this evening. From the second to the fourth century, and on to the end of antiquity, the foremost component of the Greek intellectual tradition was professedly Platonic. Many of the leading religious thinkers in the Christian tradition, following a path blazed in the first century by the Jewish philosopher and exegete Philo,[4] engaged in dialogue with the Greek intellectual tradition, and that meant Platonism. Such engagement is evident in the leading theologians of the Alexandrian tradition, Clement[5] and Origen,[6] but it is present elsewhere, in apologetic historians such as Eusebius,[7] or even at the fringes of Hellenistic influence, in the Syrian Christian Bar Daisan of Edessa.[8]

It is a truism that there was involvement with Platonism on the part of early Christians. There has, however, been considerable debate in recent years among historians of philosophy and Christian doctrine about the extent and nature of that involvement. The late German historian of Platonism, Heinrich Dörrie, vigorously maintained,[9] that, at least before the wholesale baptism of neo-Platonism in the fourth and fifth century by figures such Marius Victorinus and Pseudo-Dionysius, the engagement with Platonism by most Christian theologians was governed by apologetic concerns. Christians cited Platonists only to prove them wrong or to show the superiority of their own philosophical theology. Dörrie's assessment has not won universal acclaim,[10] but it has forced students of later antiquity to think carefully about what they mean by a Christian (or for that matter Jewish, or Gnostic) Platonism.

4. See Chadwick 1967, pp. 137–92, esp. chap. 9, "The beginnings of "Christian philosophy: Justin: The Gnostics."

5. See Osborne 1957, Lilla 1971, and May 1983, pp. 123–32.

6. See Trigg 1983, and Crouzel 1989.

7. See Ricken 1978, pp. 321–52.

8. On Bar Daisan see esp. Drijvers1970, pp. 190–210; 1975, pp. 109–22; and 1982, pp. 157–75.

9. Dörrie 1971, pp. 15–28; 1976, pp. 166–210; 1981, pp. 1–46;.1987.

10. For critical perspectives see Meijering 1974, pp. 15–28; Aland 1983, pp. 11-30; May 1983, pp. 129; Beyschlag 1988, pp. 107–13, 128–30. For a general review of the earlier phases of the discussion see Ritter 1984, pp. 31–56.

The problem of the relationship between Platonism and Christianity is replicated on a somewhat smaller scale in the relationship between Platonism and Gnosticism, our subject this evening. One end of the spectrum of modern scholarly opinion was maintained by Hans Jonas, who argued that both Gnosticism and the Platonism of Plotinus were manifestations of the same "spirit of late antiquity."[11] Hans Joachim Krämer and John Dillon are more reserved. Yet in Krämer's analysis, certain Gnostics were clear representatives of one strand, the quadripartite, of middle Platonic metaphysics.[12] In the vague but suggestive phrase of Dillon, Gnostics, along with Hermetists and others, comprised the "dark underside" of the Platonic tradition.[13] At the other end of the spectrum, Dörrie and A.H. Armstrong see nothing but a superficial appropriation of some Platonic motifs in Gnostic circles.[14]

The contemporary range of opinion about the affiliations of the Gnostics is mirrored in antiquity. Plotinus in *Enneads* 2.9[15] suggested that the Gnostics are Platonists manqué, thinkers who had been inspired by authentic Platonic positions, but who had made fundamental errors and been attracted by some notions that were downright silly.[16] From that critique, by the way, we know at least that there was some actual contact between Platonists and Gnostics. That judgment is supported by the

11. See Jonas 1964 and 1966; 1971, pp. 45–53.

12. Krämer 1964.

13. Dillon 1977.

14. Armstrong 1978, pp. 87–124. This article represents an explicit modification of one earlier position (Armstrong1967a, pp. 195–268, esp. pp. 243–45): "It is easy to attribute the resemblances higher up [scil. the ontological ladder] to Platonic and Neopythagorean influences on Gnosticism, which there undoubtedly were" and "the possibility of some Gnostic influence [scil. on Plotinus]... cannot be absolutely ruled out." Yet he was more reserved in Armstrong 1940, p. 50 (Repr. 1967).

15. Much has been written on *Enn.* 2.9. For the earlier literature see Roloff 1970, Elsas 1975, and Bazan 1974, pp. 463–78; and 1980.

16. Cf. esp. *Enn.* 2.9.6: "Generally speaking, some of these people's doctrines have been taken from Plato, but others, all the new ideas they have brought in to establish a philosophy of their own, are things they have found outside the truth. For the judgements too, and the rivers in Hades and the reincarnations

biography of Plotinus by Porphyry which indicates that the positions criticized were held by personal acquaintances of Plotinus, members of his circle in Rome in the middle of the third century.[17]

Another negative assessment appears in Christian sources somewhat earlier than Plotinus. Hippolytus, the crusty heresiologist and anti-pope of the early third century, made it his business to find Greek philosophical roots for all the heretical positions that he combatted. In his *Refutation of all heresies*, or *Philosophoumena*, he connected Valentinian Gnostics to the Pythagorean and Platonic traditions,[18] claiming not, like Plotinus, that his opponents are not properly Platonic, but that they are much too devoted to their Platonism. Gnostics, then, were too Platonic for a rigorously orthodox bishop, but not Platonic enough for a professional Platonic philosopher, although in each case the critics acknowledged significant contact between Gnostics and the Platonic tradition.

As a way of reflecting on these assessments, I propose to consider some of the primary sources for the phenomenon of Gnosticism that have come to light in recent decades. These discoveries are from the Nag Hammadi library, a collection of some fifty tractates originally written in Greek but preserved in Coptic translation. The library was sequestered in the Upper Egyptian desert in the late fourth century, probably as a result of pressure

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come from Plato. And the making a plurality in the intelligible world, Being, and Intellect, and the Maker different from Intellect, and Soul, is taken from the words in the *Timaeus*. For Plato says, "The maker of this universe thought that it should contain all the forms that intelligence discerns contained in the Living Being that truly is" (*Tim.* 39E7–9). But they did not understand, and took it to mean that there is one mind which contains in it in repose all realities, and another mind different from it which contemplates them, and another which plans—but often they have soul as the maker instead of the planning mind—and they think that this is the maker according to Plato, being a long way from knowing who the maker is." Note the designation of Gnostic theories at 2.9.6.55 as "delusion" (ἀπατή); or at 2.9.10, the theory of a fallen Sophia as "absurdity" (ἀτοπία).

17. At *Enn.* 2.9.10, Plotinus refers to the Gnostics as his friends. Porphyry's account is in *Life* 16.8–9.

18. Hippolytus, *Ref.* 6.21.1; 6.29.1.

on the monks of the region to conform to stricter standards of orthodoxy.

My strategy will be to explore the two streams of Gnostic tradition involved in the critiques by Hippolytus and Plotinus. Although there is considerable debate among historians of ancient religion about the precise definition and extension of "Gnosticism," these two streams of tradition, the Valentinian[19] and the "Barbeloite" or "Sethian,"[20] are paradigm cases of the religion. Both generally fall within the broader phenomenological definition of Gnosticism championed by many researchers since the influential work of Hans Jonas.[21] Both, that is, tend to be dualist, anticosmic religions of salvation, although, as I will suggest at least for the case of Valentinianism, the dualism is moderated, possibly under Platonic influence. Both streams also fit within the narrower definition of Gnosticism as the religion of a specific group or set of related groups, with a core of definable symbolic expressions about the structure of the world and the source and destiny of the human self within it, although those symbolic systems also undergo significant development.[22] Whoever else may be usefully grouped under the Gnostic umbrella, Valentinians and Sethians certainly belong there.

In speaking of these Gnostic phenomena I use the term "stream" advisedly, because in assessing the relations between Platonism and Gnosticism a diachronic perspective is required. As we know, we cannot step into the same stream twice. Although there are elements of continuity in groups, the streams

19. Older works on Valentinian Gnosticism such as Sagnard 1947 and Orbe 1958–1966 remain valuable, but need to be updated on the basis of the Nag Hammadi evidence.

20. There has been debate about the implications of the designation of some Gnostics as Sethian, a designation originally proposed by Schenke 1974, pp. 165–72. The results of the debate are summarized in Layton 1987.

21. Jonas 1964, 1966. His definition influenced heavily the work of the Messina Conference, Bianchi, ed. 1970, and is enshrined in the widely used survey of Gnosticism by Rudolph, 1977. For further reflections on the problem of definition, see Bianchi 1977, pp. 16–26; Rudolph, 1983, pp. 21–37; and Pearson 1990.

22. Such a perspective informs the useful collection of primary texts by Layton 1987.

do meander across the ancient intellectual landscape, while being fed by various tributaries and intersecting at specific points. For both Sethians and Valentinians I propose to consider three phases, without suggesting that these phases are rigidly distinct or exhaustive of all the developmental stages of the two movements. To anticipate the results of this exploration, I shall suggest that between the early second and mid-third centuries various Gnostics displayed a growing, and increasingly complex, engagement with Platonic philosophical traditions. One stream, the Sethian, moves, in its metaphysics, into closer contact with professional philosophy and may have left a mark upon it.[23] The other stream, the Valentinian, begins as a kind of Platonic-Christian appropriation of the first stream. It moves through two phases of systematization in which it acquires a philosophical structure for its version of Christian systematic theology.

The first phase of both movements can be set in the late first to mid-second century C.E. Developments at this stage remain the most obscure part of the history of the Gnostic phenomenon, although research stimulated by the Nag Hammadi collection continues to shed new light on the period.[24] I agree with those scholars who see the so-called Sethian tradition to be the earlier of the two Gnostic streams.[25] It probably appears first on the fringes of Jewish circles,[26] perhaps among disaffected "god-fearers," in Syria or in Egypt. The movement was apparently characterized by a radical exegesis of the Jewish scriptures, particularly of Genesis, that provided a rationale for sectarian identity by anchoring the alienated baptizing group[27] in the scriptural

23. For an attempt to sketch a history of the Sethian literary corpus, with many useful observations about its philosophical elements, see Turner 1986, pp. 55–86.

24. See, e.g., Stroumsa 1984, and Jackson 1985.

25. A major contemporary exception to the scholarly consensus about the relationship between Sethian and Valentinian Gnosticism, originally propounded by Irenaeus, is Pétrement, 1984.

26. For evidence of the Jewish elements in Gnosticism, see Pearson 1984, and 1990.

27. On the allusions to baptismal practice in the Sethian texts, see now Sevrin 1986.

tradition of Seth, the son of Adam, who, as "another seed," took the place of the righteous Abel. Thinkers in this group, perhaps stimulated by condemnation from official circles,[28] eventually attempted to explain how they could be in the difficult social and general human situation in which they found themselves. Their explanation consisted in a story about the origins of the cosmos and the spiritual entities within it, the current structure of the cosmos, and its ultimate fate. The general contours of the basic Gnostic myth of this tradition are probably familiar, although there is considerable variation in the details of various reports which need not concern us here.

The basic plot of the Sethian cosmogonies revolves around the figure of divine Wisdom, Sophia or Faith-Wisdom (πίστις-σοφία). An element of the supernal world, obviously derived from Jewish sapiential traditions, Sophia commits a primal sin and falls from the Pleroma, the world of divine fullness. She thereby produces the phenomenal, material world and the ignorant and jealous deity who rules over it. Ialdabaoth by name, he is a thinly disguised version of the Old Testament's Yahweh. He heads up a group of astral powers who contribute to the fashioning of the bodily prison in which the human spirit is held captive. Sophia herself or a being produced by her eventually comes to rescue her captive offspring by awakening in them the spark of Gnosis.

The abortive begetting by Wisdom explains the existence of this world and its ersatz deity, but whence came Wisdom herself? Some texts are not concerned to answer that question. The primitive aretalogy describing the descents of Pronoia embedded in the important Sethian text, the *Apocryphon of John* (NHC 2,1:30, 12-31, 31), gives no hints about the origins of the revealer figure. Other accounts are vague, positing Wisdom as a second principle beside a primal spirit.[29] Still other accounts seem to

28. For this hypothesis about the generation of key elements in the Gnostic myths, see Segal 1977.

29. See *Hypostasis of the Archons* NHC 2,4:94, 4ff; *Origin of the World* NHC 2,5:98, 10–23; *The Thunder* NHC 6,2:13, 3–5.

presuppose a mythical triad of primal Father, Spirit-Mother, and Child (or children), one of whom is Sophia.[30] Such stories in their various versions enabled their tradents to symbolize the conflicts and pressures that impinged on their lives and to score various points against their opponents, the archons of synagogue, church, or state who served the oppressive ruler of this world. Yet all of this seems to be rather unpromising raw material with which to effect a synthesis with Platonism.

At a second stage of the Sethian tradition, we find the primitive mythological schemes elaborated in various ways. Part of this revision involves not metaphysics or epistemology, but the appropriation of popular Greek psychology or popular physics.[31] The sources of such learning are handbooks of astrology or other occult sciences, such as the nonextant *Book of Zoroaster*, whence the *Apocryphon of John* claims to have garnered its information about the astral powers that shaped the human soul.[32] A similar text was *The Configuration of the Fate of Heaven That is Beneath the Twelve*, cited by the author of the untitled Sethian tractate currently known as *On the Origin of the World*.[33]

It is, however, possible to detect more serious appropriations of philosophical elements in the Sethian cosmogonic myths. An illustration of the growing theological and philosophical sophistication of this stream of the Gnostic movement is evident in the description of the first principle in the *Apocryphon of John*. This Sethian classical text is found in four copies in our ancient sources, and was known in some form to Irenaeus when he composed his massive heresiological work around 180. The *Apocryphon of John* is clearly a composite work which, like the Pentateuch or the Gospels, grew over time, probably as an authoritative statement of Sethian self-understanding. Although literary archaeology can be a precarious business, there are some clear seams in the various versions of the text

30. Such seems to be the most basic structure of the *Apocryphon of John*, the best-attested version of the Gnostic story.

31. See Perkins 1980a, pp. 36–46.

32. *Ap. John* NHC 2,1:19,9–10

33. *Or. World* NHC 2,5:107,15.

and these suggest some of the stages of its redaction. In the version of Nag Hammadi Codex 2 the description of the first and second principles displays similarities to the simple description of a first principle and Sophia in the typologically more primitive accounts in the *Hypostasis of the Archons* and the *Origin of the World*. This description is, however, expanded or interrupted by two elements, an affirmation of the absolute transcendence of the first principle, and a very Christian-sounding notice that the unknown first principle is made manifest only by the Revealer who came from that transcendent monad.

The apparent expansion reads, in part:

> He is the invisible Spirit of whom it is not right to think of as a god, or something similar. For he is more than a god, since there is nothing above him, for no one lords it over him. For he does not exist in something inferior to him since everything exists in him. For it is he who establishes himself. He is eternal, since he does not need anything. For he is total perfection. He did not lack anything that he might be completed by it; rather he is always completely perfect in light. He is illimitable, since there is no one prior to him to set limits to him. He is unsearchable, since there exists no one prior to him to examine him. He is immeasurable, since there was no one prior to him to measure him. He is invisible, since no one saw him. He is eternal, since he exists eternally. He is ineffable (ἄρρητος), since no one was able to comprehend him to speak about him. He is unnameable (ἀκατονόμαστος), since there is no one prior to him to give him a name (NHC 2, 1:2, 33-3, 17).

The via negativa of this portion of the *Apocryphon of John* manifests a new sophistication about the transcendence of the first principle in this Gnostic stream.

A second move accompanies the affirmation of the transcendence of the first principle, namely an explanation of the generation of the second principle. The *Apocryphon of John* portrays an

imaginative version of the Aristotelian (and later Platonic) notion of the prime mover contemplating itself, thereby producing a subject-object duality. *Ap. John* BG 27,1-14 reads:

> (The Invisible Spirit) contemplated his own image when he saw it in the pure light-water which surrounds him; and his thought (ⲉⲛⲛⲟⲓⲁ) performed an act, it appeared, it stood (ⲁⲥⲁϩⲉⲣⲁ ⲧⲥ̄) before him out of the brilliance of the light. This is the power which is before the All, which appeared; that is, the perfect Providence (ⲡⲣⲟⲛⲟⲓⲁ) of the All, the light, the likeness of the light, the image of the Invisible. She is the perfect power, Barbelo, the perfect aeon of glory.

This explanation of the initial development from Unity to Multiplicity in the *Apocryphon of John* is part of the same systematizing phase of the Sethian Gnostic phenomenon. Whether this took place prior to the Christianization of the movement or was part of that process is unclear. The systematizing, in any case, involved an attempt to offer an explanation of the nature of, and relations among first principles.

The roots of that systematization clearly lie in philosophy. The production of a second principle, the feminine dyad, from the masculine One,[34] was a traditional Pythagorean affirmation. The "aggressive," as Merlan called them, Pythagoreans of the first century transformed the numerical emanationist scheme. Moderatus posited a First transcendent One, "beyond being and essence," an echo of the famous line of the *Republic* (509B 6-9) that said that the idea of the Good was "beyond being,"[35] a second One consisting of mathematical ideas, and a third principle, undifferentiated or potential quantity.[36] The affirmation of a transcendent first principle continues, both in moderate

34. For the sexual dichotomy, cf. Hippolytus, *Ref.* 6.29.3–4.

35. On the history of this phrase, see Whittaker 1969, pp. 91–104. Precisely Plato does not say νοῦ καὶ οὐσίας. This is the mystery which Whittaker is addressing.

36. For the text and translation of the report from Simplicius, *In Phys.* 230,34–231,27 Diels, see de Vogel 1959, vol 3, pp. 349–51; and Merlan 1967, pp. 14–132, esp. pp. 91–92. The importance of the text was first indicated by Dodds 1928, pp. 129–42. There is a question as to how much of the text is authentic

Platonists such as Plutarch, in his *On the E at Delphi*, and particularly in the "Pythagoreanizing" wing of the Platonic tradition, particularly in Numenius, perhaps the most interesting Platonist of the mid to late second century. In his view Plato taught a hierarchy at the head of which was "The first Nous called Being itself, utterly unknown to all."[37]

The process by which Numenius explained movement from primal unity to multiplicity is similar to that of the *Apocryphon of John*. This first principle, identified by Numenius with the Idea of the Good in Plato's *Republic*, generates a second principle, the demiurgic Nous, who "produces his own idea," presumably by contemplating the first principle. He also produces the world before returning to contemplation.[38]

The Platonic tradition continues in the same vein through Plotinus. Michael Williams, in his study of the philosophical theme of the "stability" of the spiritual world,[39] notes the interesting parallel between *Ap. John* BG 27,1-14 and Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.2.1,7-13. Plotinus has it that:

(The One), being perfect since it neither seeks nor has nor needs anything, overflowed, as it were, and its "spill-over" made another thing. That which came into being turned back (ἐπεστράφη) toward That one and was filled and became a beholder of That one and thus a Nous. And its stability (στάσις) toward That one created Being (τὸ ὄν), while the vision directed toward That one created the Nous. Therefore, since it stood at rest (ἔστη) before That one in order to behold, it became Nous and Being at the same time.[40]

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first-century Pythagoreanism and how much is neo-Platonic elaboration. I follow Merlan and Armstrong 1978, p. 116.

37. Frag. 17 des Places (26 Leemans), from Eusebius, *Praeparatio evangelica* 11.18.22–23.

38. Frag. 16 des Places (25 Leemans), from Eusebius, *Praep. evan.* 11.22.3–5.

39. Williams 1985, pp. 104–105.

40. Plotinus, however, in his discussion of the Gnostics is critical of a position like that of Numenius that posited two "minds" in the intelligible world (*Enn.* 2.9.1; 2.9.6).

There are undeniable structural similarities between the structure of the highest levels of reality in the revised Sethianism and the Pythagoreanizing Platonism of the second century. Precisely with the major witness to this strand of the Platonic stream, Numenius, we find yet another important similarity with Sethian theologoumena.

Recall that Numenius posited two levels of Mind, one equated with the Idea of the Good of the *Republic*, the other equated with the Demiurge of the *Timaeus*. Yet this second principle, because involved in matter, is somehow split into two deities that remain somehow one.[41] That move anticipates, on the one hand, the Plotinian division of Mind and Soul, but it also parallels many of the Gnostic explanations of the generation of movement out of the supernal world, according to which the heavenly being Sophia splits into two portions, one of which remains on high in the Pleroma, while the other descends to the phenomenal world.[42] One might debate the direction of dependence here, but it seems to me that the more likely explanation is from philosophers to the Gnostics. The philosophical doctrine affords a way of dealing with two sets of problems. Exegetically, it explains the relationship between the two figures of Demiurge and World Soul or Living Being in the *Timaeus*, both of which are distinct from the first principle, which is rather equated with the Idea of the Good of the *Republic*, or, as in Plotinus, with the One of the *Parmenides*. Ontologically, the split helps to bridge the gap between transcendence and immanence which remained a fundamental issue throughout the history of religious Platonism. The notion of the split mind is then used by Gnostic interpreters as a useful rationalization of the mythical fall of Sophia.

Before we turn to the final and clear phase of the Sethian-Platonist encounter we must turn to the second Gnostic stream

41 Frag. 11 des Places (20 Leemans), from Eusebius, *Praep. evan.* 11.17.11–18. Even Armstrong 1978, pp. 98–99, sees closer connections between Numenius and the Gnostics than with other elements of the Platonic tradition.

42. For examples of the division, cf. the report about the teaching of Valentinus in Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 1.11.1–12.3.

that we shall follow from the first through the third century. Valentinian theology began in Alexandria in the early second century, apparently as an offshoot or interpretation of the Sethian stream, probably when Sethianism had already been given a philosophical veneer. At that time and place several intellectuals found something meaningful in Christian teaching and tried to understand that teaching in conjunction with their philosophical training. The most important examples apart from Valentinus are Basilides and Carpocrates. The precise contours of their synthesis of Christianity and Hellenism remain obscure. The case of Basilides is beset with problems due to the radically divergent reports about his teaching in the heresiologists.[43] Yet if there is any truth to the report that Basilides taught of the radical transcendence of the first principle, of whom not even existence could be predicated,[44] we may hear another echo of Plato's remark about being "beyond being." The reportedly libertine ethics of Carpocrates and Epiphanes led to considerable vilification, but their stance toward the Law could be construed as a consistent application of Pauline principles in the light of a vision of the ideal society akin to that of the *Republic* where all things, including wives, were held in common.[45]

Alexandrian Christianity in the early second century obviously was an environment conducive to intellectual experimentation. Valentinus was part of that environment before migrating to

43. Irenaeus (*Adv. Haer.* 1.24.3–7) presents a rather Platonic/Valentinian Basilides, whose intelligible hierarchy consists of the Unoriginate Father – Nous – Logos – Phronesis – Sophia – Dynamis (the last three perhaps should be understood as aspects or attributes of the level of reality associated with Logos) – the planetary powers. Hippolytus (*Ref.* 7.20.1–27.13) attributes to Basilides a radical negative theology, from whose first principle a series of "Sonships" emanated. If we knew more about the school of Basilides we might be able to fit these divergent accounts, as well as the other fragmentary remains, into some sort of developmental sequence. For the relevant passages, see Foerster 1972, vol 1, pp. 59–83, and Layton 1987, pp. 417-44, who gives preference to the account in Irenaeus.

44. Hippolytus, *Ref.* 7.20.2–21.1.

45. The key text is Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 3.2.5,2–9,3. A translation, along with other data on the Carpocratians, may be found in Foerster 1972, vol 1, pp. 38–40. A full dossier on the Carpocratians is assembled by Smith 1973, pp. 295–350.

Rome near mid-century. The scanty fragments of his works preserved in patristic testimonies[46] give evidence of a person with some literary skills, a taste for complex metaphors, and perhaps an ascetical bent. We would be able to say little about his involvement with Platonism, or any other philosophical school, on the basis of these texts alone. One of the tractates from Nag Hammadi, the *Gospel of Truth*,[47] has provided new grist for the mill. A text of Valentinus by this name was known to Irenaeus, and it is likely that the Nag Hammadi tractate is identical with it.

A problem for the identification is the fact that the Gospel of Truth bears little resemblance to the presentations of the Valentinian system reported by the heresiologists of the late second century. I believe that there are enough hints of Valentinian theology in the text to warrant the attribution to Valentinus, and that the discrepancies between the text and later reports can in part be attributed to the genre of the work, a homily designed to appeal to a general Christian audience.[48]

If the *Gospel of Truth* is in fact by Valentinus, and I will assume that attribution here, we may use it to pursue our theme. In the work we find little systematic metaphysics or epistemology. Yet there were professional Platonists in the early second century whose interest and literary products range beyond works of technical philosophy. Although Plutarch lacks the subtlety of a Plotinus, or even the plodding systematizing of an Albinus, he displays a set of interests with interesting parallels to the *Gospel of Truth*. While Plutarch can display his philosophical erudition by refuting the mistakes of Epicureans or Stoics,[49] he is equally content to explore the existential truth hidden in the guise of exotic myths, a pursuit he follows with considerable success in his *On Isis and Osiris*. There Egyptian myth is interpreted not only in terms of metaphysics, but also through another, Persian, mythical tradition. The intricate interweaving of the myth of the

46. See Layton 1987, pp. 217–49.

47. For the critical text, translation, and notes, see Attridge 1985. An alternative translation may be found in Layton 1987, pp. 250–64.

48. See Attridge 1986, pp. 239–56.

49. Particularly in his essays, *Non posse vivere suaviter*, *De Stoicis repugnandis*.

dominion of Error (Πλάνη) and Gospel traditions in the *Gospel of Truth* exhibits an approach to religious questions and traditions similar to that of Plutarch.[50] A similar interest in and engagement with the wisdom of the orient is also found in the fragments of Numenius.

General similarities of method between the *Gospel of Truth* and *On Isis and Osiris* are perhaps insufficient to demonstrate a Valentinian connection with the Platonic tradition. There are indications of a more important link, although one that displays the particular combination of hermeneutical and metaphysical interests in Valentinus.

One of the most remarkable passages in the *Gospel of Truth* is a meditation on the revealing Son as the Name of the Father (38,8-40,10). This obscure text wrestles with a problem of religious epistemology generated by the assumption that Valentinus shared with the revisers of the Sethian tradition, with Philo before him, and with other Christian teachers of second-century Alexandria, the assumption that the transcendent God was, in essence, unknowable. Christians of course had an answer to the problem of divine transcendence in the person of Jesus, understood as the one who revealed the hidden God. A saying attributed to Jesus himself in Matt 11:27 articulates this perspective. This theology of Jesus as the revealer characterizes the fourth Gospel, which may be in dialogue with some form of Gnosticism. It is evident in the Christian revisers of Sethianism whose hand is felt in the *Apocryphon of John*,[51] where it is affirmed after its emphasis on divine transcendence, that:

> We know not the ineffable things, and we do not understand what is immeasurable, except for him who came forth from him, namely from the Father. For it is he who told it to us alone to say that God was known through his revealing Son.

As a Christian, Valentinus shared this perspective, but as a

50. For similar judgments see Stead 1969, pp. 75–104, esp. 93 and 1980, pp. 75–95.

51. *Ap. John*, *NHC* 2,1:4,15–19.

reflective Christian, he was interested in explaining how revelation worked. *The Gospel of Truth* in general offers such an explanation and the meditation on the Son as Name is part of that explanation.

The argument in the passage is obscure and convoluted, perhaps in part due to the quality of the Coptic translation.[52] But certain central affirmations stand out.

a. The Father has an ineffable Name, which is revealed through the Son (38,22-24).

b. The Son in fact is the name of the Father, begotten by him (38,7; 38.32-34; 39,19-20; 39,25).

c. The Name that is the Son is no ordinary name. Nor is it a description composed of attributes (39,3-6).

d. The one who (or that which) names in the proper sense is the one who truly and exclusively knows the object of the name (39,7-11).

e. The Proper or True Name that is the Son provides direct and unmediated access to the reality of the Father, i.e., rest or abiding in the Father for those to and over whom the name is uttered (38,20; 38,28-29; 40,30-41,13).

The imagery and conceptuality of the passage have complex roots. The first and last of the points that I have enumerated are clearly traditional Jewish Christian elements. The notion that God has an ineffable name derives from the Jewish tradition that the tetragrammaton, YHWH, was not be pronounced, except, of course, by the high priest in the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement. The second point, the claim that the Son reveals the Father, is familiar from Matthew 11 and John 17, where Jesus thanks the Father for giving him the name to bestow on his disciples.

The last of my five points spells out the practical implications of the reflection on Jesus as Name, apparently alluding to bap-

52. Fragments of a different, and apparently clearer, translation are preserved in Codex 13.

tismal practices of initiating new members of the community in the Name of Jesus, or in the triple Name of Father, Son, and Spirit, as a result of which the newly "Christened" bore the name of Christ, and did so as a permanent affair, not as a temporary loan.[53]

Within the traditions about the name of the Son, traditions familiar to Valentinus from his religious heritage, appears a more abstract reflection about the nature of the Name. Such reflection is not unparalleled in second-century sources. Valentinus was possibly aware of contemporary theories about the Logos or Word of God that we meet in second-century apologists such as Justin. These theories, as is well known, appropriated the Stoic distinction between thought as λόγος ἐνδιάθετος and speech as the λόγος προφορικός, to suggest how there might be phases in the existence of the Son, while continuity with his source in the Father. Valentinus does not follow this path in treating the Son as the name of the Father. If he knew the Logos theology of the apologists he may well have thought that it addressed the wrong theological problem, that it was, to use modern categories, too much interested in the ontological status of the Son and not enough interested in his soteriological function. Nonetheless, the parallel indicates something of the engagement with philosophical tradition in the environment of the *Gospel of Truth*. This text may display another kind of engagement.

I suggest, in fact, that the notions which Valentinus deploys, with some irony to be sure, are Platonic. They are found in the treatments of names in the *Cratylus* and in the *Seventh Epistle*. The latter, whether or not it is authentic, distinguishes (342A-B):

> for everything that exists ... three classes of objects through which knowledge about it must come; the knowledge itself is a fourth, and we must put as a fifth entity the actual object of knowledge which is the true reality. We have then, first, a name; second, a description; third, an image; and fourth, a knowledge of the object.

53. A similar reflection on permanent vs. borrowed and hence temporary names, associated with baptism, appears in the Valentinian *Gospel of Philip*.

The analysis is exemplified in the case of a circle, of which there is the name circle, the definition of it, "composed of nouns and verbal expressions," the class of objects drawn or worked on a lathe, knowledge, understanding and correct opinion concerning them, found not in sounds but in minds, "whereby it evidently differs in its nature from the real circle and from the aforementioned three."

Valentinus was clearly aware of the distinctions made in this text, since one of his few meager fragments to have survived, in Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 4.89.6-4.90.1, makes a point about the relationship between the spiritual and the material by sketching an analogy with a work of art.[54] Valentinus makes a distinction between a face, the portrait of a face, and the name attached to the portrait, and the unclarity which the name rectifies. The function of the terms of the illustration suggests that the epistemological analysis of Plato's *Seventh Epistle* is familiar, but that Valentinus accords a higher epistemic status to names than does Plato. In this regard he may be reacting critically against a position of his older contemporary, Basilides, who seems, if Hippolytus is correct, to have denied the possibility of there being any name for the first principle. Perhaps Basilides accepted the Platonic critique of the possibility of knowledge through names.[55] Confronting the passage on the Son qua name in the *Gospel of Truth* with Plato's reflections on naming suggests why that might be so.

The *Gospel of Truth* recalls the distinctions of the *Seventh Epistle,* in its remark that the Son qua Name is not "composed of appellations" or perhaps better, "predications." It is not a composite explanation, as Plato put it, nor is it, to use Aristotelian terms that may also lurk in the background, a definition combin-

54. See Layton 1987, p. 237.

55. Hippolytus, *Ref.* 7.20.3, "For what is not even inexpressible ... is above every name that is named. For the names do not even suffice, he says, for the world, so multiform is it, but fall short. And I do not have it in me to find correct names for everything; rather it is proper to comprehend ineffably, without using names, the characteristics of the things which are to be named. For (the existence of the) same designation(s for different things) has caused the hearers confusion and error about the things."

ing genus and species. It is, like the object it names, simple. So far the distinctions of the *Epistle* are preserved, but the *Gospel of Truth* departs radically from the Platonic text in its affirmations that the Son-Name actually provides knowledge of its referent. On this point the *Gospel of Truth* coheres with the fragment of Valentinus in Clement in its highly positive assessment of the epistemic function of at least one name. Plato's whole point in the *Epistle* is just the opposite, that knowledge comes from studying realities, and not names. Is it the case, then, that Valentinus uses language reminiscent of Plato without comprehension or consistency?

I think not, and I suspect that a reason for his departure from the clear epistemology of the *Epistle* lies in Plato himself, read within Valentinus' Christian framework. Note that the *Gospel of Truth* does not explicitly cite the third of Plato's categories, the "image." As the fragment indicates, Valentinus clearly knows of the distinction of image (εἰκών) from name and reality. He may choose not to make the distinction because Christian tradition emphatically calls the Son an "image" of God.[56] Valentinus had ample warrant for ignoring the distinction between the two terms in the *Cratylus* (439A), where Socrates says "Have we not several times acknowledged that names rightly given are the likenesses and images of the things which they name?" The text obviously suggests that some names are "likenesses and images" of the reality named.

What names are those that are rightly given? The *Cratylus* provides an answer which, I suggest, aided Valentinus, but before we see what the answer is, it may be useful to remember what the *Cratylus* itself was about. Much of the dialogue is a tour de force of etymologizing, as Socrates and his interlocutors explore the problem of whether signifiers, of which common nouns or "names" are the paradigmatic case, have a natural or conventional relationship to what they signify. The final results are rather aporetic.

Contradictions appear in the way various kinds of names are applied (438C) and, as in the *Seventh Epistle*, the one who would

56. Cf. 2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15.

learn is urged to look for the truth behind the name/images (439A-B). To learn that truth is, by the way, difficult, "beyond you and me," says Socrates to his interlocutor (439B). The problem with names in the phenomenal world is that they are applied to things in a state of flux. They are full of contradictions because their referents are unstable. There may indeed be a natural relationship between signifier and signified, but it is not enough to guarantee any sort of knowledge (439C-E).

The critique of names and their epistemic instability at the phenomenal level suggests a contrast with the noumenal level where objects are stable, and their signifying images, by implication, correctly applied. In that realm, the necessary conditions advanced by Socrates for the existence of knowledge-providing names will obtain: The named will be immutable (439E); the namer will really know the thing named (438A); the namer will be a "power more than human" (438C). These are the conditions which the *Gospel of Truth* seems to invoke, although it does so not for a whole realm of forms, but only for the single case of the Name of the Unnameable.

Some of what Valentinus is doing would have sounded familiar to contemporary Platonists, but some of it would have been quite strange. His rhetoric is more evocative than definitive. He may simply be involved in an elaborate metaphorical play describing rather ordinary Christian experience, or in the articulation of a more mystical position. He could, for instance, be saying that the experience of encounter with the Divine in Christian Baptism or Eucharist, rituals where the Name of Christ is invoked, is the point where the transcendent becomes known. He could also be suggesting that true knowledge of the One/Father only takes place in the position of the Son, where there is direct, non-discursive, grasp of the reality of God.[57]

57. Theories about names continue in Valentinian sources. In the *Tri. Trac.*, other aspects of which are to be discussed below, names are inadequate to express the Father, who can name himself (NHC 1,5:55,4–5), who is made known through a Son (65,28–66,5). The name, "Father," awakens the spiritual hypostases (61,14–19), and each of the hypostases or aeons of the spiritual world is a "name" of the Father (73,8–18). In the *Gos. Philip*, worldly names are decep-

We will not tarry on the possible ways in which the imagery of Valentinus might be construed. I hope I have said enough to suggest how at least this one highly creative second-century religious thinker may have utilized one element of his Platonic heritage in order to engage in critical reflection on his Christian religious tradition.

The second stage of the Valentinian tradition may be dealt with more quickly. The disciples of Valentinus operative from the middle to the late second century are perhaps the best known representatives of the Gnostic phenomenon. It was primarily they who stimulated the negative reaction of the anti-Gnostic Fathers, Justin, Clement of Alexandria, Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian. In those patristic sources we find abundant attestations of the systematizing tendencies of the school. How far back into the teaching of Valentinus himself the structured metaphysics of a Ptolemy or a Theodotus go remains a matter of some debate. My own suspicion is that what Irenaeus reports as the system of Valentinus in *Adv. haer.* 1.11 may well depend on the master's own writing, perhaps in his attempt to sketch the sort of myth that he found useful to exploit for his purposes as Plutarch did the myths of Isis and Osiris. I doubt whether Valentinus accorded as much importance to this "system" as did either his pupils or his detractors.[58]

His pupils, particularly Ptolemaios,[59] conceived of a hierarchi-

tive, while names in the eternal realm would be used correctly; the name that the Father gave the Son is not uttered, but the Son becomes the Father by wearing the name of the Father; those who have the name know it but do not say it (NHC 2,3:53,23–54,13).

58. Note the judgment by Stead 1969, pp. 93: "I think it more likely that Valentinus and Ptolemaeus at least were men of a certain sophistication, who were able to operate with gnostic mythology much as contemporary Platonists dealt with the *Timaeus*, accepting it as an authoritative parable which could nevertheless be reinterpreted, rather than as literally exact." There has been debate about whether the major interests of the Valentinian school were in the ontology implied by the myths they used or the psychological processes they symbolized. The Valentinians themselves claimed that they were primarily interested in the latter (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 2.15.3; Plotinus, *Enn.* 2.9.16). Their claim has been supported by Koschorke 1975, p. 36, but rejected as apologetics by Abramowski, 1983, pp. 1–10, esp. p. 8.

59. For a collection of the texts see Foerster, *Gnosis*, 121–61.

cally structured universe, that would have paralleled the ontological hierarchy of one strand of middle-, and much of neo-Platonism. At the apex of the chain of being stands a first principle, either dyadic or, in the account of the Valentinian system recorded by Hippolytus, monadic, from which emanates a spiritual or noetic world, comprised of what sound like Christianized versions of Platonic ideas, i.e., abstractions such as Vitality (Ζωή) and Truth ('Αλήθεια) are paired with Word (Λόγος) and Church ('Εκκλησία). Beneath this world of spirit or mind stands a psychic world, generated, as ever, by the waywardness of an emanation of God who splits into two. The psychic world, with the Demiurge at its head, stands over the material cosmos where elements of the divine spirit are entrapped awaiting release.[60] The cosmic tripartition of all that is other than the first principle, a tripartition into spirit, soul, and matter, is replicated at the social and individual levels. The world may be divided into spiritual Valentinians, ordinary psychic Christians, and material pagans. The individual soul apparently has the same trichotomy, apparently with the same three potentialities. Time, as well as space, is tripartite, being divided among the pagans, Jews, and Christians. These trichotomies intersect in various ways and their driving principles stand in some tension, a phenomenon we shall have to explore further. The ontological structures are certainly influenced by Platonic thinking, as found in such religiously minded thinkers as Numenius. Yet for all their ingenuity, the successors of Valentinus, at least as reported in the church Fathers, do not have quite the master's creative sparkle.

At this point let me leave the Valentinian tradition and return for a final visit with the Sethians, in the last phase of the movement that we will consider. One of the remarkable discoveries resulting from the Nag Hammadi find has been the recovery of several texts that bear names mentioned by Porphyry in his account of the Gnostic literature read in Plotinus' circle in Rome. The contents of those texts provide enough similarities to the

60. Parallels between the derivation of matter from soul in Valentinian Gnosticism and Plotinus have long been observed. Cf., e.g., de Vogel 1953, pp. 43–64, esp. p. 47ff.

criticism of Plotinus to confirm suspicion that they were indeed the texts read in some form by Plotinus' Gnostic friends.[61] Unfortunately, most of these texts are quite fragmentary, but enough of at least one of them, *Allogenes* (NHC 11,3), survives to enable us to explore early third-century philosophical Sethianism.[62]

Allogenes is formally a revelation dialogue,[63] with parallels in in Jewish apocalypses and other revelatory literature such as the Corpus Hermeticum. In it a symbolic figure, Allogenes, the person of "another race," receives revelations from an angelic figure about the structure of the noumenal world and the way in which one may experience a mystical ascent of the soul to encounter the highest principle in that world.[64] The text displays obvious affinities to the Sethian tradition of the second century, affinities most evident in its designation of hypostases in the noumenal world. Yet, like other Sethian texts, *Marsanes*[65] and *Zostrianos*,[66] which stem from the same general phase of the movement, Allogenes departs significantly from earlier treatises in its lack of any overt Christian elements. Absent is the identification of the bringer of salvific revelation with Christ; absent too is the polemical exegesis of the Genesis story of creation, which vilified Yahweh as the ignorant or oppressive creator. The lack of such explicitly Christian elements probably represents not a witness to a primitive phase of the Sethian movement, but to its dechristianization in the third century.[67]

What is left when the Christian elements are gone is an ontolo-

61. See Robinson 1977, pp. 132–42.

62. The critical edition of the text is now available in Hedrick, ed., 1990, pp. 173–267.

63. On this genre in gnosticism in general see Perkins, 1980.

64. A fundamental study of the text is Turner 1980, pp. 324-51.

65. For the critical edition, translation, notes and introduction, see Pearson 1981, pp. 229–347. His analysis is also available in his essay "The Tractate Marsanes (NHC X) and the Platonic Tradition," in Bianchi , ed., 1978, pp. 373–84, a revised version of which appears in Pearson 1990, pp. 148–64.

66. On this text (NHC 8,1) see Sieber 1973, pp. 233–40.

67. For this interpretation of the late Sethian texts see, e.g., Abramowski 1983, pp. 1–10.

gy that supports and fosters a mystical piety, not unlike what emerges later in Platonic circles in, e.g., Iamblichus. The structure of the intelligible world in late Sethianism evidences similarities with the Platonic tradition as it developed from Numenius through Plotinus. At the apex of the hierarchy stands a transcendent first principle treated with the conventional negative theology. The text hovers between a monadic and a dyadic description of this first principle. In any case, it posits a second principle coordinate with the first, described as a triply powered spirit. This triply powered spirit resembles the transcendent water of the *Apocryphon of John*, looking into which the first principle sees itself reflected and hence contemplates itself as object. In fact the triply powered spirit of Allogenes may be an interpretation of precisely that earlier Sethian entity. We shall return to the function of this entity momentarily

At a lower level of reality lies a familiar Gnostic figure, Barbelo, the name of the ancient mother figure in the primitive Father, Mother, Son triad. This version of Barbelo, however, replicates precisely on its level of reality the structure of the highest level. It is comprised of three principles or aspects, the Hidden (Καλυπτός), the noetic First Manifest (Πρώτωφανης), and the Self-generate (Αὐτογενής).

The latter half of the text consists of one lengthy revelation discourse in which the visionary, Allogenes, is told how he must mount up the chain of intelligible being, grasping these aspects of the divine before he can achieve his vision of the primal principle. What he will come to realize and perhaps experience is the utter transcendence of that principle. He will thereby come to a mystical-Gnostic version of realizing the ancient Platonic ideal of escaping the evils of the phenomenal world and becoming "assimilated unto God insofar as is possible."[68]

Much of what we find in this text as I have described it could well fit the description of the Gnostics known by Plotinus, with their multiplication of oddly named spiritual entities.[69] Yet

68. *Theaet.* 176C–E; cf. *Rep.* 9.585; *Timaeus* 90A; *Laws* 4.716A. Plotinus' mystical experiences are well known; cf., e.g., *Enn.* 4.7.10.

69. *Enn.* 2.9.2.

there is one interesting dimension to the analysis of the noumenal world that establishes a connection with third-century Platonism. The constituent elements of the triply powered spirit are designated Existence (ὕπαρξις, οὐσία, Coptic: ⲡⲉⲧⲱⲟⲟⲡ = τὸ ὄν); Vitality (ⲱⲛⲍ =ζωή; or more abstractly ⲙⲛⲧⲱⲛⲍ); and Intellection (ⲙⲛⲧⲉⲓⲙⲉ or ⲛⲟⲏⲧⲏⲥ, also called Blessedness, ⲙⲛⲧⲙⲁⲕⲁⲣⲓⲟⲥ). This triad plays a prominent role in neo-Platonism.[70] It appears occasionally in Plotinus, although without a systematic function;[71] in Marius Victorinus, from whom Augustine probably learned of it,[72] and in the fifth century in Proclus, as a set of attributes of all intelligibles.[73] This dual attestation, and the appearance of the triad in the anonymous *Parmenides Commentary* sometimes attributed to Porphyry,[74] has served as the grounds for the suggestion that the triad was introduced by Porphyry.[75] The Nag Hammadi text *Allogenes* now suggests that the triad was known in the third century. It already performs there the function that it will come to have in later neo-Platonism, of bridging the gap between the utterly transcendent One and the subordinate elements of the divine world. Although the Monad is, in the traditional phrase, "beyond mind and being," existence, intelligibility, and vitality are the mirror in which the transcendent is for the Gnostics reflected. Plotinus and his school could not, and in fact did not, find such a doctrine objectionable.

We have followed Sethianism from its rude beginnings in the late first century as a critical religious stance based on a radical exegesis of biblical materials which demonized the creator and his world through its final phase in the sophisticated salons of third-century Rome where the protest has vanished and the myth has come to symbolize a structure for a rational mystical experience.

70. A review of the evidence and the discussion is available in Wire 1990, pp. 173–91, esp. pp. 188–91. See also King 1991.

71. *Enn.* 1.6.7; 3.6.6; 6.6.8. See Hadot 1960, pp. 142–57.

72. *Civ. dei* 10.23.

73. See Dodds 1963, p. 220.

74. Kroll 1892, pp. 599–627; Hadot 1961 pp. 410–38.

75. See. Theiler 1933, p. 4; and Hadot 1966, pp. 127–57, and *idem* 1968, pp. 1.102–43

The last stage of Valentinianism, at least the last stage that I shall treat this evening, shows a slightly different movement. One of the tractates found in the same codex as the *Gospel of Truth* presents a comprehensive review of Valentinian theology. In the comprehensive scope of its systematization this text, the *Tripartite Tractate*,[76] carries to a new level the tendencies of the intermediate phase of the Valentinian school. It also bears formal as well as contentual similarities to third-century works of Christian theology, such as Origen's *De principiis*.[77]

This Valentinian *Summa* is, however, a thorough revision of Valentinian theology. The revision simplifies and rationalizes the description of the Godhead. At the highest level of reality is found a Trinity of a transcendent Father, his Son, and the Spiritual Church. The text also reduces the mythical or dramatic dimensions of the description of the intelligible universe. Gone are the enumerated aeons that make up the earlier Valentinian Ogdoad, Decad, and Duodecad. These are replaced with an indeterminate multitude of spiritual entities. Gone too is the figure of Sophia, replaced by a masculine member of the spiritual world produced from the highest Trinity. The figure, named the Logos, performs many of the same functions of the old fallen feminine Sophia. Gone is the radically negative assessment of the Demiurge who rules over the world of soul and creates the phenomenal world. There is a chief psychic archon but his actions are not malevolent, only ignorant. Consequently the text articulates even more strongly the relatively positive stance toward creation that we can detect behind the late Sethian texts.

The forces that generated this revision of Valentinian theology were complex. The most important were no doubt ecclesiastical. Criticism of Valentinian theology by Irenaeus, Clement, Tertullian and other theologians and bishops of like mind had its impact. The Valentinians always considered themselves Christians and attempted to remain within the Great Church.

76. For the critical text, translation, and notes, see Attridge, Pagels in Attridge, ed., 1985.

77. These parallels are highlighted in the most recent critical edition and commentary, Thomassen and Painchaud 1989.

The *Tripartite Tractate* is an example of their intellectual attempt to do so.

Philosophical criticism does not seem to have been a major independent factor. The dialogue partners of the author of this text were Christians, not professional Platonists. The response that the anonymous Valentinian theologian gives to his critics does, however, involve the use of certain philosophical principles and perspectives that suggest that he or she had at least a passing exposure to professional philosophical discussion. Time constrains me to give but three examples.

First, we find in the *Tripartite Tractate* some technical philosophical jargon. A common way of discussing first principles since the first century had been to use a shorthand of prepositions.[78] The three first principles, God, the Ideas, Matter, common among many middle Platonists, could be referred to as the ὑφ οὗ, the ἐξ οὗ and the πρὸς ὅ, all inspired by passages in the *Timaeus*.[79] A hierarchy of four or more first principles could also be expressed in this way. In its revisionist account of devolution from and reintegration into the Divine, the text assigns one hypostasis a role as the one "from or through whom" everything outside of the Father is produced (NHC 1, 5:65,10). That there is some "prepositional theology" at work here is clear, although precisely what the affirmation is remains ambiguous, since the Coptic phrase ⲉⲧⲉ ⲁⲃⲁⲗ ⲥⲓⲧⲟⲟⲧϥ could translate either ὑφ οὗ, ἐξ οὗ or δι' οὗ.[80] I earlier thought that some sort of instrumental causality was being attributed to the hypostasis in question. The hypostasis would therefore have been best identified as the Logos, the late Valentinian equivalent of Sophia. I now suspect that a different bit of prepositional philosophy is being affirmed, as I shall explain in a moment.

A second and more interesting philosophical element in the text is a careful deployment of the commonplace, but ultimately Aristotelian, categories of act and potency to describe the relationship of hypostases in the intelligible world. One fairly obvi-

78. See Dörrie 1971, pp. 17–33, esp. 21.

79. *Tim.* 28A4, 28A6, 31B7.

80. Cf. Crum 1962, pp. 429b.

ous way, in an emanationist system, to bridge the gap between an ultimately transcendent first principle and the beings that emerge from it is to say that the latter potentially exist as discrete hypostases within the former. The *Tripartite Tractate* takes that path, making its point through a number of images,[81] the most striking of which is that of the spiritual hypostases or aeons in a fetal state in the intellectual womb of the Father.[82]

In making this point the *Tripartite Tractate* used a distinction at home in the Platonic tradition. As far back in the history of the school as Speusippus, the Dyad of Plato's *Philebus* could be viewed as pure potentiality. Even Plotinus can speak of the second hypostasis of his system, Mind or Nous, as potency coming to actuality.[83] This is particularly striking because Plotinus frequently insists on the full actuality of Nous,[84] and one of the major points on which he criticizes the Gnostics known to him is the sort of deployment of categories of act and potency to hypostases of the intelligible world where all is actuality.[85]

Given the sense in which the highest principles have certain potentialities, the prepositional metaphysics applied to the second hypostasis of this system should probably be translated "the one from whom."

Although these and other interesting parallels with philosophical discourse can be catalogued, it is clear that this Valentinian system remains an example of Christian theology. This is evi-

81. In describing the process of emanation the text also uses the utterly conventional images of spring-stream, light-radiance, root-branches, perfume-fragrance, etc. See, e.g., 66,13–29.

82. *Tri. Trac.* NHC 1,5:60,1–62,33, esp. 60,29–33 and 61,20–62,5.

83. *Enn.* 3.8.11,1–2.

84. *Enn.* 2.5.3; 5.9.4,6–14. Armstrong 1967, p. 62, notes that this is a point of serious inconsistency in Plotinus.

85. *Enn.* 2.9.2,23–26: "For they will not assert that there is one principle which exists potentially and another which exists actually; for it would be ridiculous to distinguish things existing actually and potentially, and so multiply natures, in things which exist actually and are without matter." The *Allogenes*, by the way, may offer a response to such a criticism with its suggestion that categories of act and potency should be applied analogously to the highest level of reality. There hyperactuality and hyperpotentiality obtain. Cf. NHC 11,3:48,14–37.

dent in the text's conventional critique of philosophy as epistemologically inferior to revealed religion.[86] In the description of the intelligible world, this is nowhere more apparent than in the attribution of Will and Freedom to all spiritual hypostases. Most strikingly, the transcendent Father wills the process of emanation from himself, including the creation of the Demiurge and the material world, and wills himself to be known.[87] The Logos, responsible for the rupture in the Godhead, acts in freedom,[88] as do all creatures here below.

So much, then, for the final stage of Valentinianism available to us. Let me draw our survey to a close at this point. What I have tried to do for you this evening has been, in effect, to trace a chapter in the intellectual history of late antiquity, or to revert to my earlier metaphor, to follow two speculative streams from the first through the third century. This journey through the bayous of the ancient mind has I hope shown something of the complexity of the relationship of religious and philosophical elements in the period. Plato's heirs were indispensable dialogue partners with Gnostics of various kinds, as they were for Christians. The dialogue produced not simply apologetics, although that was there, but also fusion and synthesis of mystical piety and speculative metaphysics. The foundations for the more complete syntheses of the fourth and fifth centuries were being laid deep in the second.

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86. *Tri. Trac.* 108,13–114,30.

87. *Tri. Trac.* 55,35; 62,30; 71,36–72,1; on the Demiurge: 100,19–101,5.

88. *Tri. Trac.* 74,21.

Commentary on Attridge

Pheme Perkins

Professor Attridge has situated the quest for "gnostic platonism" between Justin Martyr in the mid-second century C.E. and St. Augustine in the late fourth century. By the end of Augustine's life in the fifth century C.E., that version of gnostic religion, Manichaeism, from which he claimed Platonism had helped to rescue him, was in decline. He has pointed out that for Christian apologists intellectual seriousness required an engagement with Platonic philosophy—though what Platonism was for second and early third century intellectuals remains a matter of debate. Therein lies one difficulty. The "platonism" with which we compare Christian and gnostic writings is the reconstructed Platonism of twentieth century scholars.

Some reconstructions, such as Prof. Armstrong's, rely on general categories derived from Plato's extant works. From that perspective second and third century gnostic—and even Christian—writers do not appear to have taken over any but the most superficial terms, ontological schemata and perhaps a few theological sentences or principles. The gnostics are clearly much more concerned with exegeting (or some might say deconstructing) biblical and apocryphal Jewish legends and the developing Christian traditions.

Other reconstructions, such as Prof. Krämer's or Prof. Dillon's, construct Platonism through sources like Philo, Numenius, the Seventh letter and a strong dose of pythagoreanism. Gnostic and early Christian thinkers, though marginal, share a growing